

Book Reviews

Unger, Roni. *Poesía en Voz Alta in the Theater of Mexico*. Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1981. 182 pp.

In June of 1956 a group of friends led by Juan José Arreola and Octavio Paz initiated a series of theatre programs in Mexico City that would continue, despite constant changes of personnel, until 1963. The group took as its name "Poesía en Voz Alta." In order to chronicle the eight programs that resulted from these collaborations, Roni Unger undertook the imposing task of collecting and assembling information from over one hundred personal interviews, from innumerable periodical and newspaper articles, and even from play-bills. The result is a detailed account of the programs, the participants (actors and actresses, directors, producers, set and costume designers, choreographers, musical directors, contributors, authors, and consultants), their preparations for and the resulting stage representation of each program (including descriptions of set, make-up, costume, and lighting), theatres, financing, critical and audience response, difficulties, successes, and struggles.

The book consists of a preface, eight chapters, and a selected bibliography that includes books of general interest, references to texts used in the various programs, articles that supply historical background and critical reaction, plus a list of published and unpublished interviews. There is also a section containing photographs of most of the productions.

In the preface, Unger outlines the purpose of the book and explains that basically she will follow a historical approach to the material. Chapters one and two provide such a historical background, the first describing the state of Mexican theatre in the early 1950's, and the second detailing the origins and aims of Poesía en Voz Alta. She points out that the group, guided and influenced in the beginning by Arreola and Paz, came into existence primarily to rebel against the traditional, realistic theatre of the time, and to allow Poesía's contributors to experiment and to play with language and poetry in a theatrical setting. The element of innovation remained an identifying mark even after most of the original members ended their participation.

The third through the seventh chapters trace the preparation, presentation, and critical and public reaction associated with each of the eight programs. The first, under the direction of Arreola, consisted of a series of short pieces by Spanish medieval and Renaissance authors and by Federico García Lorca. This marriage of works from such different periods, the daring cos-

tumes, and the imaginative staging produced a wide range of reactions. Some accorded the program unqualified praise, while others charged that Poesía en Voz Alta was merely a group of snobs providing entertainment for other snobs. The praise far outweighed the criticism, however, and the participants set about preparing their second program, this time guided by Paz.

The second production consisted of three one-act French plays plus *La hija de Rappaccini*, the first play written by Paz. Again reaction was enthusiastic, but less so than for the first program. By this time, Arreola had dissociated himself from the group, leaving Paz as the primary influence for the next three programs. In 1957, the third program opened. This time the group chose Calderón de la Barca's *La cena del Rey Baltasar* and several selections from Juan Ruiz's *El libro de buen amor*. The decision to present the works in the original Spanish once again drew charges of snobbery, but undaunted, the group moved ahead with its fourth program, which included pieces by Quevedo and three plays by Elena Garro that mark her entrance into the world of Mexican theatre.

The fifth program, the last in which Paz participated actively, initiated a new direction which led the group to presentations of single plays in the last four programs, as opposed to the collages that made up the first four. The first full-length play was T.S. Eliot's *Murder in the Cathedral*; chosen for the sixth program, in 1959, was *The Maids* by Jean Genet; for the seventh program, the group produced Sophocles' *Electra*. By this time, though, there were serious financial problems, and after the eighth program—Lope de Vega's *La moza de cántaro*, in 1963—the group ceased to exist.

Unger's abundance of information provides a thorough chronicling of the life of the group, including insights into its internal functioning as well as into the results of its labors. Those results consistently met with the same polarized critical response mentioned previously: there was continued praise for the productions along with arguments that they were proof that Mexican theatre was capable of staging works of high artistic quality; there was also the constant condemnation for playing only to an elite group of literary snobs. In the final chapter, Unger takes these conflicting views into account in her review of the short life of Poesía en Voz Alta, a review in which she attempts to explain the group's eventual disintegration and disappearance. Finally, she comments on Poesía's influence on Mexican theatre and on the subsequent activities of many of its participants.

While the book obviously documents a phenomenon relatively unresearched until now, the task of collecting and assembling the bits and pieces of material seems to have had an effect on the form of its presentation. At times the sheer quantity of information is dealt with in sentences which tend to become choppy or which simply provide lists of details. This becomes especially awkward when the author mentions critical reactions. The quoting of a series of sentence fragments or even of individual words seems to reflect the various fragments of source material and sometimes makes it difficult to establish any over-all sense of perspective. For the later plays, Unger does try to step back and provide that sense of wholeness. Such an approach would have been helpful in earlier chapters as well.

Poesía en Voz Alta unquestionably produced an effect on Mexican thea-

tre, but it has been curiously ignored by most critics, which might suggest that the effects have been limited. While *Poesía en Voz Alta in the Theater of Mexico* fills a gap, it still does not clarify the question of influence completely. By bringing the reader so close to the material and by providing so much detail, the book makes it difficult to step back and assess all the activity in its proper context. In the more general chapters, Unger attempts such an assessment of the group's influence which, in terms of individuals, has undoubtedly been substantial. Again, however, it is a question of details, of the parts instead of the whole.

Perhaps a final decision about the impact of *Poesía en Voz Alta* is simply up to the reader. Roni Unger has provided a complete and thoroughly researched historical account of the existence of the group and of its inner workings. She has rescued a wealth of information that might otherwise have disappeared, and she has used it to supply a link in the story of the development of Mexican theatre, which is precisely what she intended to do. The question of how to insert that link should perhaps rightly be answered by the reader.

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González, Lydia Milagros, ed. *Libretos para El Tajo del Alacrán*. San Juan: Instituto de Cultura Puertorriqueña, 1980. 234 pp.

Theatrical groups or companies are especially abundant throughout Latin America. To a great extent it is nearly impossible to keep order and systematic records regarding these groups. Sporadic and inconsistent performances, publications which are extremely difficult to acquire, and unreliable information are only some of the problems encountered by scholars.

The Puerto Rican group called "El Tajo del Alacrán" ("The Scorpion's Sting") was particularly active in San Juan between the years 1966 and 1971. All nine plays in this collection were written between these years. The editor and compiler of these plays, Lydia Milagros González, participated in the political, cultural and theatrical activities which characterized the sixties and early seventies. She divides the history of this performing theatre company into three stages and the collection includes representative, but presently reedited, dramas from each stage.

The first stage covers 1966 through 1967. González suggests that "no teníamos dinero pero teníamos amigos." These friends gave love and support to these actor students. People such as Jorge Córdova (pianist) and Kurt Weill (musical arrangement) were particularly helpful. Two plays from this first stage are included: *La historia del hombre que dijo que no* (written 1966, revised 1977) and *El drama de la A.M.A.* (written 1967, revised 1977). The first is a short play involving a soldier who decides *not* to fight and the second deals with a politician who has to resolve a metropolitan bus strike. In this second drama there is a character who is the Conscience of the Politician, and it should have been developed much more within the drama. For example, Conscience says "Es que no sólo las guaguas andan mal. Son muchas las cosas

que andan mal en este país, Cuchicuchi." While this is true, the statement itself comes across as rather self-evident.

The second stage covers the year 1969. González suggests that this is the building stage upon which Puerto Ricans could express their own desires, needs and ideas. The group wanted every islander to see him or herself on stage. Four short plays are presented in this section: *Lamento borincano* (1969, revised in 1977), *El juicio* (1969, revised 1977), *La confrontación* (1969, revised 1977), and *The Post Card* (1969, revised 1977). The last of these four dramas is noteworthy in that He (Él) is writing postcards to his friend John in the United States. The language is exaggerated but not totally atypical of this bilingual and bicultural island. For example, he writes on the postcard "Esto muy importante. Este país bueno pa vivir. Yeah, man. Hay comida americana, cine americano, even the TV shows. Are you listening to my Spanish? Me hablando español. Oíste John?"

The third stage covers the years 1970 through 1971. This last stage was primarily influenced by the "Bread and Puppet Theatre" and the carnival "cabezudos." The three plays include *El entierro* (1971, revised 1977), *La tumba del jíbaro* (1971, revised 1977), and *La venta del bacalao rebelde* (1971, revised 1977). This last short drama has the various food products play parts in the drama (Ms. Milk, Mr. Coffee, etcetera) and deals with the topic of economic exploitation.

The general topics in these dramas are presented quite superficially and little depth is to be noted. The use of "Puerto Ricanisms" is fascinating and the use of language within each drama is quite satisfactory. These plays are most "stageable" and could hold audience interest for a good length of time. Finally, the idea of dealing with *one* theater company, for *one* complete history in *one* complete volume and under *one* director is quite worthy. This kind of specificity is most welcome.

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Carlos Miguel Suárez Radillo. *El teatro barroco hispanoamericano*. Madrid: José Porrúa Turanzas, 1981, 3 vols., 700 pp.

El estudioso cubano-español Carlos Miguel Suárez Radillo, quien ha publicado ya varios volúmenes relativos al teatro de Hispanoamérica, nos entrega ahora una nueva prueba de lo mucho que le apasiona el tema. Como anuncia el subtítulo ("Ensayo de una historia crítico-antológica"), el libro pertenece a ese género mixto tan útil en el cual ha trabajado y trabaja el autor y del cual es *El teatro barroco hispanoamericano* el fruto más maduro. Tanto el estudiante como el especialista en teatro y literatura hispanoamericana encontrarán en esta obra un panorama claro y sistemático, rico y variado, que es sin duda una de las más valiosas aportaciones hechas en cuanto al género y a la época.

El libro tiene el propósito ambicioso y, sin embargo, muy eficientemente logrado, de ser una historia crítica a la vez que una antología del teatro que se

desarrolló, entre 1600 y 1750 aproximadamente, en el vasto imperio colonial de España en América, a lo largo y ancho de todas sus divisiones político-administrativas. El tomo I abarca el teatro en el Virreinato de Nueva España y sus diversas jurisdicciones: la audiencia de Santo Domingo, las capitanías de La Habana y Santiago de Cuba, la audiencia y capitanía de Guatemala, y la gobernación de Puerto Rico. Los otros dos tomos comprenden el Virreinato del Perú y sus regiones satélites: la audiencia de Santa Fe de Bogotá, la audiencia de Quito, la capitanía de Venezuela, la audiencia y capitanía de Chile, y las gobernaciones del Paraguay y del Río de la Plata, Tucumán y Cuyo.

En la Introducción, el autor hace una presentación adecuada del contexto histórico-cultural en que se inscribe el teatro barroco de Hispanoamérica. A grandes rasgos, se refiere a las consabidas conexiones entre el barroco y la contrarreforma al igual que la decadencia del poderío español. Sirviéndose de opiniones de otros críticos y dando también las suyas propias, Suárez Radillo ofrece una descripción de los elementos constitutivos y característicos del barroco en general y del barroco teatral en particular. En cuanto al barroco de las colonias, lo explica como un fenómeno de penetración cultural, aunque también cita, pero sin elaborar o ahondar como hubiera sido deseable, el juicio incitativo de Luis Alberto Sánchez de que "América era barroca desde que nació." Concluye el autor, inevitablemente, que el barroco hispanoamericano fue un fenómeno mestizo por naturaleza. El resto de la introducción está dedicado a la explicación del método utilizado, que en lo cronológico se basa en una división propuesta por J. J. Arrom (alborada, apogeo y ocaso), y en lo geográfico, en la repartición territorial arriba mencionada.

El método de estudio es seguido sistemáticamente a través de los quince capítulos del libro. A manera de ejemplo, diré cómo se aplica en el caso de la Nueva España. En el primer capítulo, se da una visión panorámica de la vida teatral en lo que hoy es México, sobre la base de informaciones provistas por Armando de María y Campos, Julio Jiménez Rueda y otros, en la que destacan las figuras de Juan Ruiz de Alarcón y Agustín de Salazar y Torres, correspondientes a la "alborada" del barroco; luego Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz y Eusebio Vela, durante "el apogeo y la decadencia." A continuación se estudia, en dos capítulos, la obra dramática de los escritores indicados y de otros considerados también representativos: Francisco Bramón, Matías de Bocanegra, Cristóbal Gutiérrez de Luna, para el primer período; y para el segundo, Francisco de Acevedo y Manuel de los Santos y Salazar. Esta división en los dos períodos señalados se mantiene en el caso de las otras regiones del virreinato, aunque a veces se comprime si la importancia cultural de tal capitanía o gobernación no da para tanto.

Cada autor recibe un tratamiento semejante en lo que respecta al método de estudio, aunque no a la extensión, como es obvio. A Ruiz de Alarcón se le dedican veinte páginas. Se da una breve semblanza del dramaturgo, sin descuidar el dato erudito o anecdótico. Al tratar el debatido tema de la mexicanidad de Alarcón, Suárez Radillo se engarza en un debate personal con M. Menéndez Pelayo, en el cual éste se lleva la peor parte; citando a J. J. Arrom, Pedro Henríquez Ureña y otros, Suárez Radillo arguye convincentemente en favor de la visión no española presente en los dramas de Alarcón. Viene luego

un análisis de las tres obras principales del dramaturgo (*La verdad sospechosa*, *Las paredes oyen* y *No hay mal que por bien no venga*) que da una idea suficiente de las características, valor y trama de los dramas, apoyándose en el texto mismo, citado abundantemente.

En suma, Carlos Miguel Suárez Radillo va desenvolviendo ordenada y meticulosamente su historia-antología del teatro barroco hispanoamericano, amparándose en los eruditos que han hecho las principales contribuciones a la investigación del género en cada región, pero cotejando, corrigiendo, puntualizando datos, mas sin herir sus fuentes, a veces también infiriendo y conjeturando para explicar lagunas o contradicciones, aunque sin sobrepasar los límites de la legítima suposición. Junto al historiador se hace presente el fino crítico que aprecia la alusión erudita, el matiz costumbrista o la eficaz metáfora, y que selecciona los diálogos con muy buen criterio, a veces rescatándolos de manuscritos únicos o ediciones raras. El resultado del trabajo arduo e inteligente de Suárez Radillo es un cuadro completo, variado y a veces insospechadamente rico del tan poco estudiado barroco hispanoamericano.

Si se me preguntara qué es lo que me habría gustado ver en esta obra para estar totalmente satisfecho como lector exigente, yo diría: más atención teórica al concepto de barroco; muchas definiciones se han dado sobre el barroco, y muchas otras se darán, pero es preciso someter algunas de ellas (tradicionales y venerables) a cuestionamiento, como ya se ha comenzado a hacer. Pero tal vez es injusta mi demanda, porque lo que Suárez Radillo se propuso hacer fue una historia-antología, y él ha cumplido su tarea con resultados respetabilísimos, a tal punto que *El teatro barroco hispanoamericano* es una valiosísima aportación de una de las personas que más saben de teatro hispanoamericano.

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